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## Relationship of self-esteem and adjustment in traditional university students

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### Abstract

This study was conducted to investigate the relationship between the various dimensions of self-esteem and five domains of adjustment of traditional university freshmen (N=83) in the first semester of their Masters program. Bivariate correlational analysis indicated a positive relationship of global self-esteem with over-all adjustment, as well as with other areas of adjustment, with the highest correlation being with academic adjustment. The self-esteem variables of competence, lovability, personal power, moral self-approval and body functioning were found to be significantly related to all the areas of adjustment. Likability, body appearance and defensive self-enhancement were significantly related to some but not all adjustment areas. Self-control and identity integration were not significantly related to any of the areas of adjustment. The importance of understanding the multidimensional aspects of self-esteem and adjustment to design effective measures of counselling and guidance is discussed.

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### 1. Introduction

The relatively organized collection of perceptions, beliefs and feelings related to the self are central to the standards that the person sets to evaluate his or her own performance and interpersonal experiences. The resulting sense of personal value or worth or the extent of appreciating, liking and prizing oneself is referred to as self-esteem. The current definitions of self-esteem tend to adopt a two-dimensional conception by integrating success (self-competency) and self-worth (self-respect) as being distinct but interdependent components of self-esteem. Such a construct of self-esteem was proposed most clearly by a humanistic psychologist, Nathaniel Branden (1995) who defined self-esteem as “the disposition to experience oneself as competent to cope with challenges of life and as worthy of happiness” (p. 27). Further support for a two dimensional perspective on self-esteem was provided by the factor-analytical studies of Romin Tafarodi and colleagues (Tafarodi & Milne, 2002; Tafarodi & Swann, 1995) who identified Rosenberg’s Self-Esteem Scale to be measuring two factors, i.e. self-liking and self-competence.

The two-dimensional approach has further been developed with a hierarchical perspective, according to which the self-related constructs e.g. self-concept, self-esteem and self-efficacy are multidimensional at a lower level, (for reviews see Bandura, 1997; Harter, 1999). The multidimensional perspective of self-esteem was structured by O’ Brien & Epstein (1988) as operating at three interacting levels in a hierarchical fashion. They considered global self-

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esteem to be at the first and the highest level and identified eight components of domain-specific self-esteem which have an influence on the level of global self-esteem. At the third and lowest level, they placed situation-specific elements of self-esteem which have minor effect on global self-esteem.

There is a well-established relationship between self-esteem and psychological well-being, e.g. depression, social anxiety, loneliness, alienation (Blascovich & Tomaka, 1991) and among self-esteem, self-efficacy, ego strength, hardiness, optimism and maladjustment (Bernard, Hutchison, Lavin, & Pennington, 1996). Several studies investigating the relationship between global self-esteem and the big five personality dimensions have consistently reported significantly negative relationship between neuroticism and self-esteem, and a significantly positive relationship between extraversion and self-esteem (Judge, Erez, & Bono, 1998).

The transition to university is considered to be a challenging and stressful life event. It was pointed out by Heins, Fahey, and Leiden (1984) that two types of stress cause high anxiety in students. One is related to academic expectations and performance and the other one is related to social factors, such as developing and maintaining interpersonal relationships. Hattie (1992) found a weak relationship between self-esteem and academic achievement, but a stronger relationship between the participants' low self-esteem and feelings of loneliness one year later.

Several studies indicate that self-esteem appears to moderate the effect of stress on the psychological functioning of the individuals. Stress seems to be inversely correlated with self-esteem (Kreger, 1995). People having high self-esteem seem to be protected from feeling distress from negative events by experiencing lesser threat to their sense of self and by having the ability to be more resilient. High self-esteem also appears to result in more active and effective coping and in increased motivation in the face of stress (Abel, 1996).

While general empirical support indicates a positive and linear relationship between self-esteem and adjustment, some studies have found more complicated interactions. In a study involving college students, A.H Karmos and J.S. Karmos (1981) found a U-shaped relationship between self-esteem and emotional adjustment, where the low scores on self-esteem indicated a large self-ideal discrepancy and got related to high emotional adjustment after a certain level. There is also evidence that the association between self-esteem and academic achievement is not only based on the level of self-esteem but also on what it is contingent upon called the "contingencies of self-worth" (Crocker & Luhtanen, 2003). They found low self-esteem of college freshmen to be predictive of social problems, whereas academic problems were predicted by academic competence contingency. The findings of another study showed both self-esteem and impostor phenomenon were direct and significant predictors of all types of college adjustment (except personal-emotional adjustment for self-esteem). Self-esteem was found to be mediated through social support seeking and avoidant coping, while problem-solving coping was unrelated to any type of college adjustment (Lefkowitz, 2003).

Although the multi-dimensional nature of self-esteem is widely being recognized, most of the research is based upon self-esteem as a global construct. This study is an initial attempt to fill in the gaps that exist in the knowledge about the multi-dimensional nature of self-esteem and in the way the various components of self-esteem contribute in the adjustment to university life. It was hypothesized that the scores on the global self-esteem scale will relate positively with the overall adjustment scores and will have the highest correlations with the academic adjustment scores. Of special interest were the relationships of the various components of self-esteem with the adjustment domains of university freshmen in the first semester of their studies.

## **2. Method**

### *2.1. Participants and Procedure:*

The participants of the study were 83 first year Masters students (42 males and 41 females), selected through purposive sampling from various departments of one public and two private sector universities of Karachi. All the participants were 21-23 years of age and were in the first semester of their studies. Understanding that adjustment issues might be different for students who are older and resume education after a gap, only those students were selected who were continuously in the process of formal education, hence qualifying as Traditional Students. To

recruit students, consent was taken from the heads of the departments after which students were approached in their classrooms. The students who agreed to participate voluntarily were selected.

### 2.1.1. Measures:

The Demographic Information Form consisted of items related to the participants' age, gender, birth order, marital status, academic grades, previous qualification and employment status.

To measure student's adjustment, the Student Adjustment to College Questionnaire (SACQ), (Baker & Siryk, 1999) was employed. SACQ is a 67 item self-report questionnaire that provides a nine-point scale for the respondents to indicate the degree to which a particular statement applies to them. It consists of four subscales measuring domains of academic, social, personal/emotional adjustment and institutional attachment/commitment. The full scale score is the sum of scores for all 67 items and provides a measure of overall adjustment to college. The alpha reliability of the sub-scales range from .77 to .91, whereas the full scale values range from .92 to .95.

Self-esteem was assessed with the Multidimensional Self-Esteem Inventory (MSEI), (O'Brien & Epstein, 1988). MSEI is based on a hierarchical conceptualization of self-esteem and provides measures of global self-esteem identity integration and defensive self-enhancement as well as eight components of self-esteem which include competence, lovability, likability, self-control, personal power, moral self-approval, body appearance, and body functioning. There are 116 items which are presented in two sections and are rated by the respondents on a five point Likert scale. The alpha coefficient of the MSEI scales range from .78 to .90 with most values above .85.

## 3. Results

Table 1 shows the values obtained by applying Pearson Product Moment Correlation to the scores on the five domains of adjustment and the eleven dimensions of self-esteem. The results confirmed the hypothesis that global self-esteem will be positively related with over-all or Full Scale adjustment ( $r = .35$ ,  $p < .01$ ), and although being significantly related to all the domains of adjustment, will have highest correlation with academic adjustment ( $r = .36$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

Table 1. Bivariate correlations between dimensions of self-esteem and adjustment domains

Adjustment	GSE	CMP	LVE	LKE	PWR	SFC	MOR	BAP	BFN	IDN	DEF
<b>Full Scale</b>	.35**	.40**	.37**	.40**	.39**	.12	.32**	.28**	.32**	.15	.19*
<b>Academic</b>	.36**	.42**	.36**	.42**	.34**	.15	.30**	.29**	.27**	.15	.19*
<b>Social</b>	.22*	.32**	.33**	.41**	.38**	.10	.25*	.22*	.21*	.14	.28**
<b>Personal/ Emotional</b>	.29**	.26*	.29**	.11	.26**	.01	.21*	.21*	.25*	.09	.01
<b>Attachment</b>	.24*	.29**	.20*	.39**	.29**	.16	.33**	.16	.27**	.12	.15

GSE=Global Self-esteem CMP= Competence LVE=Lovability LKE=Likability PWR=Personal Power SFC=Self-control MOR=Moral Self-approval BAP=Body Appearance BFN=Body Functioning IDN=Identity Integration DEF=Defensive Self-enhancement

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (1-tailed); \* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (1-tailed).

The self-esteem variables of competence, lovability, personal power, moral self-approval and body functioning were found to be significantly related to all the areas of adjustment. Competence was most significantly related to academic adjustment ( $r = .42$ ,  $p < .01$ ), closely followed by full scale adjustment and then by social, institutional attachment and personal/emotional adjustment. Lovability was almost equally significantly related with full scale and academic adjustment ( $r = .37$  &  $.36$ ,  $p < .01$ ), and then with social, institutional attachment and personal/emotional adjustment respectively. Personal Power was similarly significantly related to full scale and

social adjustment ( $r = .39$  &  $.38$ ,  $p < .01$ ), followed by academic, attachment and personal/emotional adjustment. Moral self-approval was almost equally related to institutional attachment and full scale adjustment ( $r = .33$  &  $.32$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Body Functioning was most significantly related to full scale adjustment ( $r = .32$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and subsequently to academic, attachment, personal/emotional and social adjustment.

Likeability was strongly and significantly related to all the domains ( $r$  around  $.4$  for all,  $p < .01$ ) except personal/emotional adjustment. Body appearance was most significantly and almost equally related to academic and full scale adjustment ( $r = .29$  &  $.28$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and then with social and personal/emotional adjustment, but not with institutional attachment. Defensive self-enhancement was most significantly related to social adjustment ( $r = .28$ ,  $p < .01$ ), and to a lesser degree with academic and full scale adjustment, and not with personal/emotional adjustment and institutional attachment/commitment. Self-control and Identity Integration were not found to be significantly related to any of the areas of adjustment.

#### 4. Discussion

Self-esteem has been shown to be predictive of adjustment in various studies. The results of this study confirmed the previous findings, as students having high self-esteem had better over-all and domain specific adjustment to university life. Similar relationship of global self-esteem with wellness was reported by Oguz-Duran and Tezer (2009) who found that first year Turkish students with higher scores on Rosenberg Self-esteem Scale reported higher levels of over-all wellness as well as of its four dimensions, i.e. cognitive-emotional wellness, relational wellness, life goal, and physical wellness. However, as the current study was taking into consideration various components of self-esteem rather than focusing on global self-esteem only, the analysis of the results yielded a more complicated contribution of the specific self-esteem factors in the various domains of adjustment.

Competence and Likability seem to be related at an identical level with over-all and academic adjustment. Other self-esteem variables contributing to both over-all and academic adjustment are Personal Power (feeling powerful and capable of influencing others), Lovability (feeling worthy of love and receiving care and support from loved ones) and Global self-esteem. Moral self-approval (being pleased with one's moral values and behaviours and having clear moral values) and the two scales of Body functioning and Body appearance are also related to both types of adjustment but to a lesser degree. In this study, the correlations of academic and over-all adjustment present values so close that over-all adjustment appears to be almost synonymous with academic adjustment as far as self-esteem variables are concerned. The findings of the study show that students' academic adjustment can be promoted not only by engendering a sense of competence, but also by enhancing their feeling of belongingness, as well as providing approval, support, and leadership opportunities for demonstrating social influence.

The self-esteem components contributing most significantly in social adjustment were found to be Likability and Personal Power, followed by Lovability and Competence. These results are clearly in the expected direction, as all the socially related variables play the most important role, with competence having an almost equally strong relationship. Interestingly, defensive self-enhancement, which is a measure of social desirability bias, was most highly related to social adjustment than to any other area. This suggests the tendency of students to present themselves more favourably in terms of social aspects, denying common human weaknesses. Here, again moral self-approval, body functioning and body appearance play a significant but comparatively less important role.

The Personal/Emotional adjustment domain was found to be the only area where global self-esteem played the most significant role along with Lovability. These were closely followed by Competence, Personal Power and Body functioning. Body appearance and Moral self-approval had significant but lower correlation with this adjustment area. The subjective feelings of happiness and well-being might be the reactions of feeling adjusted in social and academic areas and might also have a reciprocal effect on the adjustment process. While examining the effects of stress, social support and self-esteem on the adjustment of university freshmen from first to second semester, Friedlander, et al (2007) found that adjustment improved if perceived social support from friends increased and stress decreased. Their findings further showed that increased global, academic and social self-esteem predicted enhanced academic and social adjustment and decreased depression.

Institutional attachment/commitment was most significantly related to Likability and Moral self-approval, as well as with Competence, Personal Power, Body functioning and Global self-esteem, indicating the role of multi-faceted personal and interpersonal self-evaluations in a student's level of commitment and satisfaction with the current academic choices and environment.

In this study, the self-esteem component of Self-control and the global construct of self-concept, i.e. Identity Integration which relates to well-defined long-term goals and a cohesive sense of self were not found to be significantly related to any of the areas of adjustment. Cultural differences in behaviours pertaining to self-control and identity integration might have made these scales less suitable for Pakistani population.

The findings of the study point strongly toward adopting a multi-dimensional approach while designing interventions to facilitate student adjustment in universities. The consideration of the two factor theory of self-esteem which consists of feeling of competence, or "effectance" and of feelings of worthiness called the "social self-esteem factor" (O'Brien & Epstein, 1988), seems to be a plausible framework for planning more effective guidance and counseling programs in the higher education institutions.

## 5. Limitations of the Study

Due to time and cost constraints, the sample size had to be kept relatively small. As the participants were first semester Masters Students, the results of the study may not be generalized to students at other stages of education

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